DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 749 CS 209 801

AUTHOR Washburn, Patrick S.
TITLE J. Edgar Hoover and the Black Press in World War II.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 29p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (69th, Norman, OK, August 3-6, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Blacks; *Journalism; *News Media; *Newspapers; Press Opinion; *Racial Discrimination; United States History
IDENTIFIERS *Black Press; Espionage Act; Federal Bureau of Investigation; *Hoover (J Edgar); Sedition; World War II

ABSTRACT

Holding enormous if controversial power as Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover was sometimes controlled unexpectedly at the highest reaches of government, as illustrated by his failed attempt to obtain an Espionage Act indictment against the black press during World War II. Following anarchist bombings in 1919, Hoover pressed unsuccessfully for passage of a peacetime version of the sedition act to shut down black publications. Efforts by the Communists and Japanese to recruit black support, as well as increased criticism of discrimination by the black press, precipitated FBI investigations of black publications until the eve of the Second World War. Hoover sought his first Espionage Act indictment of the black press shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, enlisting the aid of the Justice Department. No publication had actually violated the Espionage Act, however, and an agreement was made between the Attorney General and a black publisher, circumventing the possibility of any indictment. Hoover persevered, and in 1943 mounted a major wartime attack on the black press with a report charging 43 publications with causing black discontent, but the report received no response from the administration. Two Supreme Court decisions supporting other radical publications eliminated any remaining hope of an indictment against the black press, and Hoover's final attempt at a wartime indictment in 1945 was refused by the Justice Department. While Hoover's racist views cannot be ignored, he did have valid reasons to investigate the black press. The deciding factors for Hoover and the FBI were the unwavering constitutional views of the Attorney General and the Justice Department, without which black press history probably would have been very different. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED271749

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

J. EDGAR HOOVER AND THE BLACK PRESS IN WORLD WAR II

by
Patrick S. Washburn
Associate Professor
E.W. Scripps School of Journalism
Ohio University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Patrick S. Washburn

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 209801

Presented to the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication at the annual convention in Norman, Oklahoma, August 3-6, 1986.

J. EDGAR HOOVER AND THE BLACK PRESS IN WORLD WAR II

J. Edgar Hoover, who was director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation from 1924 until his death in 1972, was one of the most controversial high government officials of the twentieth century. A master of both secret investigations and the public relations techniques needed to sustain them, he was criticized by many for violating civil rights while numerous others praised his steadfast fight against communism. But one thing on which everyone agreed was his enormous power.

Occasionally, however, Hoover's power was controlled unexpectedly and significantly at the highest reaches of government. An excellent example was his drive to obtain an Espionage Act indictment of the black press for sedition in World War II. It is virtually an unknown story involving Attorney General Francis Biddle and the Justice Department. This study will examine what occurred and explain why. Most of the documentation used was obtained from the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York; the National Archives in Washington, D.C.; and through FOI Act requests to the Justice Department and the FBI. In addition, some black journalists who worked in World War II were interviewed.

II

To understand Hoover's drive to indict the black press in World War II, it is necessary to begin in 1919. Following nine explosions set by anarchists on June 2, Hoover was named the head of the Justice Department's newly created General Intelligence Division (GID), which was ordered to "concentrate on a study of subversive activities."[1] With Hoover providing the impetus, the GID moved at a dizzying pace. It prepared biographies on 60,000 radicals in the first hundred days, and

more than 450,000 were in a card catalogue at the end of a year and a half.[2] Among those investigated were authors, publishers, and editors, which was not surprising because the GID made regular checks of 625 radical newspapers including 251 that were considered ultraradical.[3]

Black publications, many of which complained constantly and vociferously about discrimination and injustices such as lynchings, unquestionably were among those watched closely. Hoover noted in a September 1919 letter, for example, that both The Crisis magazine of the NAACP and The Messenger, a socialist publication, "are well known to me." He said that "if possible something should be done to the editors of these publications as they are beyond doubt exciting the negro elements in this country to riot and to the committing of outrages of all sorts" with their numerous racial complaints.[4]

However, Hoover was powerless to stop what was being written because both the Espionage Act and the Sedition Act, passed in 1917 and 1918 respectively, applied solely to wartime sedition. Therefore, he and Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer began pressing for the passage of a peacetime sedition act, which the United States had not had since the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 to 1801. To emphasize the need for such an act, reports on the connection between communism and blacks were sent to the Senate in November 1919 and the House in June 1920. The 1919 report, titled "Radicalism and Sedition Among Negroes As Reflected in Their Publications," contained the following:

> Among the most salient points to be noted in the present attitude of the Negro leaders are . . . the identification of the Negro with such radical organizations as the I.W.W. and an outspoken advocacy of the Bolsheviki or Soviet doctrine. . . . The Negro is "seeing red," and it is the prime objective of the leading publications to induce a like quality of vision upon the part of their readers.[5]

The report added that "the number of restrained and conservative [black]

publications is relatively negligible." To back up that statement, the GID gave Congress large amounts of what it considered objectionable material from black newspapers and magazines.[6]

This push for a peacetime sedition act resulted in extensive congressional activity. Between late 1919 and early 1920, seventy such bills were introduced and the result was the Graham-Sterling Bill, which provided fines and/or imprisonment for those who sought to overthrow or destroy the government.[7] The public quickly became alarmed, however, with negative comments coming from such influential spokesmen as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Samuel Gompers, and Zechariah Chafee, and the House Rules Committee reported out unfavorably on the bill. Thus, no action was ever taken.[8]

Although Hoover was unsuccessful in indicting any of the black press from 1919-21, the importance of that period for what occurred in World War II cannot be overemphasized. In Hoover's mind, the black press was radical. While such a reputation was not warranted by many black magazines and newspapers, Hoover made no such fine distinctions--to him, the entire black press was troublesome, even un-American. The passage of time would not erase that belief.

Furthermore, once the government's investigation of the black press began, it was not about to end even if there was no war or no perceived threat to democracy from another ideology. Documentary evidence strongly suggests, and in some cases confirms, that the Bureau of Investigation (which was renamed the FBI in the 1930s) investigated black publications vigorously and continuously throughout the entire period between the two wars. One of the main reasons were the massive but largely ineffective efforts of the Communists and the Japanese to enlist black support.[9]

Further encouragement for the investigations came from Franklin D. Roosevelt, who early in his presidency requested information on all subversive groups, particularly Communists.[10]

Still another reason was the black press' growing criticism between the wars, which ranged from discrimination in the armed services to racial injustices in civilian life. In 1940, for instance, FBI agents visited the Pittsburgh Courier, the country's largest black newspaper. The visit was precipitated by articles dealing with black attempts to vote in the South, and the agents complained to several of the paper's writers that the articles were "holding America up to ridicule."[11] In the same year, a citizen in Savannah complained to an FBI agent about two September issues of the Chicago Defender. He claimed that the paper's articles contained "propaganda" which "might hinder the Government in securing registrations from negroes who come within the draft age." Hoover forwarded the papers to the Justice Department in October, asking if they violated any federal statute. A month later, he was informed that the Defender was operating within the law.[12] In still another example in the latter half of 1941, Hoover initiated an investigation of the Pittsburgh Courier following complaints from the War Department about the paper's articles. After several months, Hoover informed the army no evidence had been found that the paper was engaged "in questionable activities with reference to the national defense program."[13]

III

With such investigations continuing until the eve of war, it was not surprising that Hoover sought his first Espionage Act indictment of the black press shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. It was directed at

the Afro-American chain of five East Coast newspapers, which ran a December 20, 1941, article that contained the comments of five Richmond blacks on what Japan's attitude would be toward blacks if it won the war. "The colored races as a whole would benefit," said a printer, echoing the comments of two of the other blacks. ". . . This would be the first step in the darker races coming back into their own." On January 30, Hoover asked Wendell Berge, head of the Justice Department's Criminal Division, if the article violated any federal sedition statutes. Berge quickly replied that such an article was permissible because the answers of the three blacks were "mere expressions of individual opinion as to the possible course of future events." To violate the federal statutes, he said that they would have had to be "false statements." "Clear" evidence also was lacking, he continued, that the article's statements were designed to harm the armed forces or affect recruiting or enlistment, all of which were covered by the Espionage Act. Nevertheless, Berge encouraged an immediate investigation of the Afro-American's ownership as well as the "character and pertinent activities" of its editors to determine if there was a tie-in with "hostile or subversive sources." This resulted in an extensive FBI investigation of the chain throughout almost the entire war.[14]

Meanwhile, FBI agents began exercising unofficial censorship by not only openly subscribing to black newspapers but visiting a number of them which they claimed were hurting the war effort with hard-hitting and frequent articles on discrimination. In fact, P.B. Young Sr., publisher of the Norfolk Journal and Guide, recalled that it was "a rare day" when the FBI did not visit a black paper early in the war.[15]

The first known wartime visit was on January 27, 1942, when an FBI

agent went to see columnist Cliff MacKay of the Atlanta Daily World. The agent asked if the Orient News Service had sent any Japanese news releases to the paper, or if the Communist Party had attempted to influence the paper editorially. MacKay, whom the agent described as "very cooperative," said that neither had occurred.[16]

Then, on March 27, MacKay wrote a column criticizing Hoover for refusing to appoint blacks as FBI agents. When the black Birmingham World ran the column, Hoover complained to editor Emory O. Jackson that it was "grossly" inaccurate and was "a slander in my opinion upon the many loyal, patriotic Negro members of this Bureau." Jackson used Hoover's letter in the World and said he would like to discuss the matter further when he was in Washington in several weeks. In an April 23 meeting in the capitol, an FBI agent criticized MacKay and told Jackson that "certain subversive forces were seeking to use the Negro press to stir up disunity." Possibly out of fear, the editor agreed that the column should not have run and admitted that it was important for the country to "stick together" because of the war. Following his return to Birmingham, Jackson received a letter from Hoover, thanking him for understanding the FBI's point of view and noting that he had instructed several local agents to "communicate" with him.[17] This obviously was an FBI ploy to hopefully keep the World in line in the future.

On July 1, 1942, an agent again visited MacKay at the Atlanta paper on an undisclosed matter. This caused MacKay to lash out angrily at the FBI in a column on July 10:

> One gathers after the conversation [with the agent] that some white people would like to read "sedition" and "subversive activity" into the determination of Negroes to achieve democracy here at the same time they are called upon to fight for its preservation abroad.
>
> Nothing could be further from the truth, as these FBI agents

were told on both occasions of their visits. The Negro, in fact, is the most American of all Americans. He has proved this over and over again. He has no split loyalties, no ties with other countries, no relatives "across the pond." He is all American, first, last and always.[18]

The Pittsburgh Courier, which was visited by FBI agents at least once in the war's first six a half months, also reacted angrily. "This sort of thing [visits by FBI agents] is an obvious effort to cow the Negro press into soft-peddling its criticism and ending its forthright exposure of the outrageous discrimination to which Negroes have been subjected," it wrote on March 14.[19] Furthermore, William O. Walker, publisher of the Cleveland Call and Post, revealed in May that a black newspaperman in Texas had written him that "the FBI has frightened all of the Negro editors in the southland." Walker did not say what the FBI was doing, but he suggested that "the papers in the northern and more liberal states are going to have to assist those in the South to resist intimidation."[20]

Meanwhile, Hoover was continuing to seek Justice Department opinions about the black press. On May 30, for example, he sent Berge ten March, April, and May issues of the Baltimore Afro-American which he considered seditious. He followed this up in July by forwarding four issues of the Oklahoma City Black Dispatch from June and July. In the latter paper, Hoover specifically pointed out articles that complained about black soldiers riding on trains twenty-four hours without food and about the soldiers being fed in Oklahoma City in "dirty, filthy, Jim Crow" kitchens located at the rear of white restaurants. He also noted an editorial that concluded all men should be equal instead of only one race being granted "special dispensation to inherit happiness." In each case, Berge replied that none of the issues had violated the Espionage Act. Even so, Hoover encouraged his Baltimore agent to continue sending in possibly seditious

material from the paper because the Justice Department wanted to review it.[21]

While Hoover and Berge were corresponding in these latter cases, a meeting occurred in Washington in mid-June which had an enormous impact on future FBI attempts to indict the black press for wartime sedition. The meeting partly resulted from a May 22 White House Cabinet meeting at which serious problems with black morale were discussed. Roosevelt suggested to Attorney General Francis Biddle and Postmaster General Frank Walker that they should talk to some of the black editors "to see what could be done about preventing their subversive language."[22] At the same time, black editors were seeking out high government officials to discuss a growing apprehension over the possibility of suppression. Their concern was heightened not only by the open visits from FBI agents and critical comments from other government officials, but rumors were running rampant in the first half of 1942. The Pittsburgh Courier's Billy Rowe, for example, recalled not only hearing that some papers might lose their second-class mailing permits but also that the government wanted to shut down some of the papers. He did not believe such talk. "The government was powerful enough that if it wanted to, it would have been able to do these things," he said. "But I didn't see any evidence of anything being done. So, I figured it was just rumors started by groups who hated blacks, like the Ku Klux Klan."[23]

But many black editors and publishers were not so sure. Therefore, Chicago Defender publisher John Sengstacke sought a meeting with Biddle in mid-June. He knew the attorney general would be tough but fair. In Washington's strong Southern atmosphere, where discrimination was easily accepted and practiced, Biddle was one of the high government officials

most sympathetic to blacks. In fact, when he had been sworn in as attorney general in September 1941, a number of blacks had backed him vigorously as "a friend of the colored people of America." Such support was deserved. Not only had he championed the work of the Justice Department's civil liberties unit immediately upon joining the agency in January 1940, but he prosecuted some whites in Detroit in 1942 for preventing blacks from moving into the federally supported Sojourner Truth housing project.[24]

Despite Biddle's reputation as a friend of blacks, he quickly made it known to Sengstacke that this was not a low-key chat. When the publisher was ushered into a Justice Department conference room, he found numerous black newspapers, including the Defender, the Pittsburgh Courier, and the Baltimore Afro-American, laid out on a table. Each of the papers had headlines about clashes in early April at Fort Dix in New Jersey and Tuskegee, Alabama, between black soldiers and whites, leaving three people dead and several more injured. Without mincing words, Biddle said such articles were a disservice to the war effort, and if the black papers did not change their tone soon, he was "going to shut them all up" for being seditious.

Sengstacke, who was just as tough as Biddle, countered that the black press was not doing a disservice to the war effort and pointed out that it had been fighting race prejudice for more than 100 years. Nor was the fight about to end. Looking Biddle "straight in the eye" to show that he "wasn't kidding," Sengstacke took a hard line: "You have the power to close us down, so if you want to close us, go ahead and attempt it." After that unpromising beginning, the two men worked out a compromise over the next hour. Biddle promised Sengstacke that the Justice Department

would not indict any of the black publishers for sedition. In turn, Sengstacke said that the black press would be "glad" to cooperate with the war effort if it was given more access to high government officials, many of whom were refusing interviews with black reporters or not allowing them to come to press conferences.[25]

While documents do not indicate if Hoover was informed about Biddle's decision not to indict the black press for sedition, they do show that he continued to seek an indictment. For example, between November 1942 and July 1943, he sent Berge issues of the People's Voice, a black New York paper, the Pittsburgh Courier, and the Afro-American chain, inquiring if they had violated the Espionage Act. They contained such items as an editorial cartoon that showed a black soldier, who represented 450,000 black servicemen, with heavy chain on his wrists to symbolize the way blacks were hampered from fighting in the war. Another issue had a letter from a black army corporal in Africa who complained about discrimination in the army, citing a number of alleged instances, and called for a government investigation. In each case, Berge replied that the papers were within the law.[26]

Then, in September 1943, Hoover mounted his major wartime attack on the black press, and blacks in general, in a 714-page "Survey of Racial Conditions in the United States." Consisting of material gathered over more than two years from fifty-three FBI field offices, the report said it was put together "to determine why particular Negroes or groups of Negroes or Negro organizations have evidenced sentiments for other 'dark races' (mainly Japanese) or by what forces they were influenced to adopt in certain instances un-American ideologies."[27] It stressed that the FBI felt some black publications were hurting the country's war effort:

> Sources of information have volunteered the opinion that the Negro press is a strong provocator of discontent among Negroes. It is claimed that its general tone is not at all, in many instances, informative or helpful to its own race. It is said that more space is devoted to alleged instances of discrimination or mistreatment of Negroes than there is to matters which are educational or helpful. The claim is that the sensational is foremost while true reportorial material is sidetracked.[28]

Thus, it was no surprise that the FBI criticized forty-three publications for causing black discontent and problems with inflammatory, sensational articles and headlines. Thirteen of those publications had alleged Communists on their editorial staffs or employees who maintained contacts with Communists, according to the FBI, or they ran articles that followed the Communist Party line.[29] In addition, five black publications were cited for running pro-Japanese material.[30]

The core of the report, in terms of the press, was contained in thirty pages that specifically examined seven black newspapers. The detailed information foreshadowed what would become commonplace ten years later in the McCarthy era. While there were no claims that illegal activity had taken place, the FBI suggested that six of the papers were causing massive discontent among blacks and, in numerous instances, had communist connections or were running pro-communist propaganda. This implied that the black papers were un-American and possibly should be suppressed, although the report did not say that. Of course, the survey may have been inaccurate or misleading. Knowing that Hoover had been concerned about Communists and blacks since 1919, some FBI agents may have reported only what they felt would please him. Furthermore, the report's information may have been selected from the FBI's Washington files with the intention of making certain black publications appear seditious. Unfortunately, in 1943 as today, outsiders did not have access to the FBI's files, and the survey's objectivity may never be determined.[31]

The material on the seven newspapers included the following:

BALTIMORE AFRO-AMERICAN. The FBI noted that the paper had numerous "Communist connections." A former staff member, for example, recently had been named the administrative secretary of the National Negro Congress, "a Communist influenced organization." In addition, the Communist Party and the Young Communist League had run an announcement on September 19, 1942, congratulating the paper on its fiftieth anniversary. Then, a week later, the Afro-American had carried an article about a radio program on the Communist Party's push for a second front. The paper's city editor also had expressed appreciation for the Communist Party's campaign to allow blacks to become telephone operators and bus drivers in the Baltimore area. "The city editor made it clear that in the future the Afro-American newspaper would be glad to print any other information concerning these or related programs which the Communist Party might sponsor," the report continued.[32]

AMSTERDAM STAR-NEWS. The only one of the seven newspapers that was not criticized, it was included to show the difference between its editorial practices and those of the People's Voice, which competed with it for New York's black circulation. The FBI noted that the Star-News was "comparatively conservative" and had criticized communism several times. "In this regard, the newspaper has opposed the Communist Party line relative to Harlem Section of New York, especially the crime wave there," said the report.[33]

PEOPLE'S VOICE. In contrast, the FBI described this paper as "a very helpful transmission belt for the Communist Party." Not only were its editorials and articles considered pro-communist, but the FBI said its well-known publisher, Adam Clayton Powell, had been "affiliated" with

numerous pro-communist individuals and groups. Furthermore, the survey pointed out that Max Yergan, who was prominent in several prominent groups, recently had contributed at least $3,000 to the paper, resulting in his name being carried in its "publication block."[34]

OKLAHOMA CITY BLACK DISPATCH. Editor Roscoe Dungee, while not a Communist, was reported to be "sympathetic with the Communist cause to such an extent that he has allowed his name to be used by many Communist front organizations and is said to have used his talent as a speaker in appearing at meetings of these groups." The FBI also pointed out that the paper apparently did "considerable" printing for the state's Communist Party and had carried a pro-communist editorial on October 10, 1942. "We shall have to report that we personally do have [a] Communistic leaning," the Black Dispatch had said. " . . . Communism believes in social equality and so does this writer."[35]

CHICAGO DEFENDER. The FBI reported that two of the paper's employees had been attending local Communist Party meetings, where they sat on the platform and made speeches. Numerous people with communist connections also had written articles for the paper. One of these, William L. Patterson, who was a member of the National Committee of the Communist Party, praised Russia for addressing the problem of racial and minority discrimination. The FBI admitted that the paper's editorials strongly supported the war effort but added that they also militantly attacked inequality. For example, on April 4, 1942, the paper reported that some black soldiers had been killed in Little Rock. The Defender said this proved "that in the South the uniform of the United States has no respect if the wearer is a Negro."[36]

MICHIGAN CHRONICLE. According to the FBI, the paper's editor was

active in the National Student League, a communist-front organization, during his years at the University of Michigan. Although he had not joined a similar group since then, sources said he still believed "sincerely" in communism, and they emphasized that the Chronicle's editorials for years had followed the Communist Party line. Furthermore, the editor had attended the Communist Party's state convention in March 1943. The FBI also noted that a number of other editors and columnists at the paper had belonged to communist organizations in the past or currently were members.[37]

PITTSBURGH COURIER. Although no communist connections were noted, the survey stressed the frequent use of both pro-Japanese and anti-Japanese articles. On January 10, 1942, for example, columnist George Schuyler had written that blacks would not be worse off if the Japanese won. Then, on March 28, 1942, he praised the Japanese for "their cleanliness, their courtesy, their ingenuity, and their efficiency." The FBI specifically pointed out that this column contained no anti-Japanese material. In contrast, however, Executive Editor Percival Prattis wrote on May 16, 1942, that he preferred white Southerners to the Japanese.[38]

If Hoover hoped that such revelations would result in black press indictments and suppressions, as he probably did, he was disappointed. He sent the survey to the White House, but no documents show that Roosevelt urged any action, if indeed he even read the report. Such a reaction was predictable. The president rarely became involved in black problems because of the political risks. Without the president's support, Hoover must have realized that there would be no black press suppressions. The only other person who could approve such action was Attorney General Biddle, and no evidence indicates that he commented on the survey either.

That was equally non-surprising. One reason was his well-known support of blacks and the black press. "The Negro press throughout the country, although they very properly protest, and passionately, against the wrongs done to members of their race, are loyal to their government and are all out for the war," Biddle said in a speech in Philadelphia on February 12, 1943.[39] That may have been his only public statement as attorney general about the black press, but it would have been more than enough to convince Hoover of the reception his report would receive seven months later.

Furthermore, the Supreme Court's decision in Dunne v. United States on November 22, 1943, eliminated any faint hope of success still harbored by Hoover. The case involved eighteen Minneapolis Trotskyites, who had published, sold, and distributed leaflets, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, and books advocating a violent overthrow of the government. Biddle, believing that sedition statutes were "unnecessary and harmful," had approved the federal prosecution to test the constitutionality of the Smith Act, which had been passed in 1940. He had done so reluctantly, feeling that the 3,000-member Trotskyite group "by no conceivable stretch of the liberal imagination could have been said to constitute any 'clear and present danger' to the government." However, he was confident that the Supreme Court would overturn the convictions. When the court refused to hear the case, letting the convictions stand, Biddle was not only shocked, but he was criticized heavily by the American Civil Liberties Union and his liberal friends.[40] In such an atmosphere, it would have been inconceivable for him to have approved a black press indictment.

At the same time, Hoover was rebuffed once again when he sought to attack a specific black paper. On October 11, 1943, he complained to Assistant Attorney General Tom C. Clark about a Chicago Defender column of

June 19 which had been critical of the treatment blacks were receiving in army camps. "Mainly, their [the black soldiers'] bitterness adds up to--'I [would] just as soon die fightin' for democracy right here in Georgia, as go all the way to Africa or Australia. Kill a cracker in Mississippi or in Germany, what's the difference!'" Charley Cherokee wrote. Noting that the column apparently referred to racial tension and a gun battle between black and white soldiers at two Georgia camps, Hoover asked if such material violated the Espionage Act. Clark replied that the column was legal. Furthermore, the Justice Department discontinued weekly summaries in the fall of 1943 of the contents of black newspapers. This was another definite sign to Hoover that the Justice Department had concluded that sedition prosecutions of the black press were inadvisable.[41]

Nevertheless, Hoover tenaciously continued to collect what he considered damaging information on the black press and push futilely for an indictment. In February 1944, for example, he sent Clark a seventeen-page report on what the Afro-American chain of papers had written in the preceding November and December. The report emphasized articles "describing alleged brutal treatment of Negro soldiers in U.S. Army camps." Then, three months later, Hoover attacked the Pittsburgh Courier for a column by Schuyler which criticized Roosevelt and other government officials for allowing segregation and discrimination to continue in the armed services. "Indeed, one sometimes asks whether they [government officials] are not fighting the Negro harder than they are fighting the Germans and the Japanese," wrote Schuyler. "Certainly many German and Japanese prisoners are being treated better than some of the Negroes wearing the uniform of Uncle Sam." On both occasions, Clark refused to

allow a prosecution.[42]

Any faint hopes Hoover still had of obtaining a black press indictment abruptly ended on December 9, 1944. Ten days before he had forwarded to Clark a twenty-four-page report which pointed out that the Afro-American chain was continuing to run critical articles about the armed services. He wanted to know if the FBI's extensive investigation of the chain, which had begun in 1941, should continue. After noting that none of the material violated federal statutes, Clark said the investigation should be discontinued because of the Supreme Court's ruling on June 12 in a sedition case. It involved Elmer Hartzel, who had been convicted in a lower court of violating the Espionage Act by writing and distributing three pamphlets to about 600 persons in 1942. The pamphlets not only called upon the country to abandon its allies and to turn the war into a racial conflict, but they questioned the integrity and patriotism of Roosevelt. In reversing the decision, Supreme Court Justice Frank Murphy noted that there had been insufficient evidence for a jury to determine "beyond a reasonable doubt" that Hartzel had meant to bring about what was prohibited by the law, such as insubordination, disloyalty, or mutiny in the armed services. "An American citizen has the right to discuss these matters either by temperate reasoning or by immoderate and vicious invective without running afoul of the Espionage Act of 1917," said Murphy.[43]

Following Clark's reference to the Hartzel case, Hoover only sought one more wartime indictment of the black press. That occurred on February 22, 1945, when he complained to Clark about three issues of the Pittsburgh Courier earlier that month. Hoover said three officials of the federal War Manpower Commission had pointed out to the FBI that the newspaper had

used "confidential" agency information to attack the WMC for supposedly "condoning" black discrimination by some Pittsburgh-area companies with defense contracts. Since the articles contained confidential WMC material concerning a national defense matter, Hoover wondered if the newspaper could be charged with espionage. Clark was not sympathetic. He told Hoover on March 1 that "prosecutive action for violation of the Espionage Statute, or any other Federal statute, . . . is not warranted."[44] Thus, despite all of his information, Hoover was effectively controlled by the Justice Department for the final time.

IV

In considering Hoover's World War II investigation of the black press and his persistent attempts to secure an Espionage Act indictment, it is tempting to believe that his efforts primarily were racially motivated After all, he was a well known racist. "J. Edgar Hoover, who has steadfastly refused to include Negroes among his 4,800 special agents, has a long record of hostility to Negroes," The Nation noted in July 1943. Calling him hostile to blacks may have been an overstatement, but William C. Sullivan, an assistant to Hoover, found that Hoover definitely "disliked" blacks. Historians have agreed with that assessment. Sanford J. Unger labeled him "prejudiced and narrow-minded, overtly biased against black people," and said this resulted from Hoover's Old South attitude. Still another historian, David J. Garrow, pointed out in 1981 that Hoover's racism was "widely documented."[45]

But such an explanation for Hoover's attempt to indict the black press in World War II is clearly simplistic. While Hoover's racist views cannot be ignored, the fact remains that he unquestionably had valid

reasons to investigate the black press from his earliest days as a Justice Department administrator. After all, the nation was gripped in the throes of a "Red Scare" when he took over the General Intelligence Division in 1919, and some black publications were not only critical of the government but obviously socialist oriented. In such an atmosphere, it was easy for him, as well as numerous other high government officials, to believe that disenchanted blacks were an easy target for bolshevik propaganda, which made the black press extremely dangerous because of its influence with readers.

Furthermore, Roosevelt clearly contributed to the FBI investigations of the black press by granting Hoover immense investigatory powers in the 1930s. Given such freedom, and the strong, continual push by both the Communists and the Japanese to curry black support between the wars, Hoover quite naturally was drawn to the black press. After all, it was highly critical of the government, which suggested that maybe the Communists and Japanese propaganda effort was successful.

As if that was not enough, the black press waved the red flag in front of Hoover by openly praising Russia, as well as Japan occasionally, both before and during the war and by showing no fear of communism. In October 1941, for example, columnist Ralph Matthews of the Baltimore Afro-American criticized the United States and England for getting rich by exploiting their citizens as well as the rest of the world, "especially the darker races." In contrast, he pointed out that Russia had tried to "perfect a way of life for her own people which will spread out the good things of life to the greatest number instead of to a chosen few."[46] Just as damning as such comments were the continual contacts between black journalists and Communists. Ironically, these often were unavoidable.

Two former Pittsburgh Courier reporters, Frank Bolden and Billy Rowe, recalled Communist press agents constantly sought out black journalists in the 1930s and 1940s.[47] Such contacts would have been noted by watchful FBI agents and relayed to Hoover, who had a consuming desire to destroy communism.

Finally, for much of 1942, the United States was not at all sure it could win the war. But the back press, instead of toning down patriotically at a time when the very life of the republic was at stake, continued to be critical and hint that maybe this was not at all "the good war" that most of the country was proclaiming it to be. The government understandably viewed such criticism as bad for morale. Blacks made up 10 percent of the population and no one was sure if the U.S. could win if they refused to fight. Furthermore, there was some concern that the press' criticism would cause blacks to become fifth columnists, blowing up power plants and railroad lines in their anger at discrimination. In such a situation, Hoover's investigations, even his attempts to indict the black press under the Espionage Act, were simply justifiable reactions to the tenor of the times. And to believe that such investigations should have ended in the latter half of 1942 as the black press toned down and the U.S. swung onto the offensive militarily is naive. There was a war to be won, Hoover had an important role to play, and he was determined to do his job. The race of those he investigated--and indicted--was of little concern.

And so the war was fought and there were no indictments. In 1947, publisher P.B. Young, Sr., of the Norfolk Journal and Guide, one of the country's major black newspapers, recalled the FBI's examination of the black press during World War II. He boasted of the result:

> The fact that years of watching and distilling of every line, every word printed in the Negro press that could by any process of reasoning have been classified as treasonable brought not one single arrest, not one single act of suppression, constituted irrefutable proof of the undiminished patriotism of the American Negro at a time when efforts to sabotage our war effort were quite general in other circles.[48]

Young was only partially correct. Certainly the loyalty of black journalists played a role in their lack of arrests and the non-suppression of their publications by the FBI. But the deciding factor for Hoover and the FBI, in terms of the black press, was the unwavering constitutional views of Attorney General Biddle and the Justice Department. Without those particular views, black press history probably would have been much different.

NOTES

[1]Fred J. Cook, The FBI Nobody Knows (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 89.

[2]Ibid., pp. 94-95.

[3]See Max Lowenthal, The Federal Bureau of Investigation (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1950), p. 91; and Stanley Coben, A. Mitchell Palmer: Politician (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 207.

[4]Memorandum, J.E. Hoover to Mr. Fisher, September 10, 1919, record group 60, file 9-12-725, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

[5]See Hank Messick, John Edgar Hoover (New York: David McKay, 1972), p. 14. Also see Lowenthal, The Federal Bureau of Investigation, p. 120; and Andrew Buni, Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), pp. 106-7.

[6]Lowenthal, The Federal Bureau of Investigation, p. 121.

[7]Robert K. Murray, Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), pp. 178, 230-31.

[8]Ibid., pp. 244-46.

[9]Patrick S. Washburn, A Question of Sedition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 32-33.

[10]Don Whitehead, The FBI Story: A Report to the People (New York: Random House, 1956), pp. 157-58, 161-62.

[11]Interview, Frank Bolden, January 14, 1983.

[12]See J.E. Clegg to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, September 30, 1940; Memorandum, John Edgar Hoover to Lawrence M.C. Smith, October 10, 1940; and Memorandum, Hugh A. Fisher to J. Edgar Hoover, November 7, 1940. All are in file 100-122319, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C.

[13]See Special Agent Report, Federal Bureau of Investigation, October 21, 1941; and John Edgar Hoover to Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, November 29, 1941. Both are in file 100-31159, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

[14]See Memorandum, John Edgar Hoover to Wendell Berge, January 30, 1942; and Memorandum, Wendell Berge to J. Edgar Hoover, February 5, 1942. Both are in file 100-63963, Federal Bureau of Investigation. Also see "The Inquiring Reporter," Baltimore Afro-American, December 20, 1941.

[15]Robert Durr, The Negro Press: Its Character, Development and Function (Jackson: Mississippi Division, Southern Regional Council, 1947), pp. 2-3.

[16]F.R. Hammack to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, September 4, 1942, file 94-8-1399-7, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

[17]See Cliff MacKay, "A Note to Mr. Hoover," Birmingham World, March 27, 1942. See also John Edgar Hoover to Emory O. Jackson, April 10, 1942; Emory O. Jackson to J. Edgar Hoover, April 20, 1942; Memorandum, L.B. Nichols to Mr. Tolson, April 24, 1942; and J. Edgar Hoover to Emory O. Jackson, April 29, 1942. All are in file 94-8-1399, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

[18]Cliff MacKay, "Now Just Who Is Subversive?" Birmingham World, July 10, 1942.

[19]"Cowing the Negro Press," Pittsburgh Courier, March 14, 1942.

[20]See "Publishers to Answer Pegler Challenge," Chicago Defender, May 30, 1942; and "Negro Press Will Fight 'Intimidation,'" California Eagle, June 4, 1942.

[21]See Memoranda, J. Edgar Hoover to Wendell Berge, May 30, July 7, July 10, July 17, and July 18, 1942; Memoranda, Wendell Berge to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, June 24 and July 25, 1942; and John Edgar Hoover to Special Agent in Charge, Baltimore, July 6, 1942. All are in

files 100-63963 and 100-20076, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

[22]Private typewritten notes, Francis Biddle, "May 22, 1942," Francis Biddle papers, Cabinet Meetings, Jan.-June 1942 folder, Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.

[23]Interview, Billy Rowe, January 3, 1983.

[24]See Francis Biddle, In Brief Authority (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), pp. 166, 169; and Clinch Calkins, "Wartime Attorney General," Survey Graphic, October 1942, p. 423.

[25]Interviews, John H. Sengstacke, April 21, 1983, and September 15, 1983. The only document mentioning the meeting between Sengstacke and Biddle is C.W.H., "Memorandum for the Office Files: The Chicago Defender," June 26, 1942, record group 28, file no 103777-E, case no. E-128, National Archives.

[26]See Memoranda, John Edgar Hoover to Wendell Berge, November 24, 1942, and March 26, April 12, May 3, May 29, June 8, and July 1, 1943; Memoranda, Wendell Berge to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, December 7, 1942, and April 30, June 12, July 12, and August 23, 1943; and E.E. Conroy to Director, FBI, March 18, 1943. All are in files 100-51230 and 100-63963, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

[27]Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Survey of Racial Conditions in the United States," undated, p. 1, OF 10B, #2420, Justice Dept., FBI, Reports folder, Roosevelt Library. A letter which was sent with the report to the White House indicates that it was completed in September 1943.

[28]Ibid., p. 430.

[29]The thirteen publications were: Baltimore Afro-American, California Eagle (Los Angeles), Chicago Defender, Colorado Statesman (Denver), The Crisis (New York), Denver Star, Kansas City Call, Los Angeles Sentinel,

Michigan Chronicle (Detroit), Oklahoma City Black Dispatch, Opportunity (New York), People's Voice (New York), and Racial Digest (Detroit).

[30]The five publications were: Cincinnati Union, The Crisis, Moorish Voice (Prince George, Va.), Pacific Topics (Chicago), and Pittsburgh Courier.

[31]Historian Eric Foner warned researchers in February 1984 about the dangers of blindly using FBI documents. "Reports of intelligence agents and paid informers cannot be taken at face value," he wrote. "More often than not, investigating agents revealed their own prejudices and preconceptions more accurately than . . . reality." See Eric Foner, "Roots of Black Power," New York Times Book Review, February 5, 1984, p. 25.

[32]Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Survey of Racial Conditions in the United States," pp. 433-42.

[33]Ibid., p. 443.

[34]Ibid., pp. 443-44.

[35]Ibid., pp. 445-47.

[36]Ibid., pp. 448-51.

[37]Ibid., pp. 451-53.

[38]Ibid., pp. 454-59. In connection with the Pittsburgh Courier's pro-Japanese activities, the FBI reported that Schuyler apparently had been invited to visit Japan in 1938 or 1939 and had written several pro-Japanese articles upon his return. At the same time, it said columnist J.A. Rogers had been entertained by Japanese officers in Ethiopia and allegedly had promised "favorable publicity" for Japan when he returned to the United States.

[39]"Biddle Lauds Race Press As Loyal to U.S.," Amsterdam Star-News, February 20, 1943.

[40]Biddle, In Brief Authority, pp. 151-52.

[41]See Memorandum, John Edgar Hoover to Tom C. Clark, October 11, 1943; Tom C. Clark to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, November 9, 1943; J. Edgar Hoover to Tom C. Clark, December 16, 1943; and Tom C. Clark to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, January 1, 1944. All are in file 100-122319, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

[42]See Federal Bureau of Investigation Report, December 31, 1943; J. Edgar Hoover to Tom C. Clark, February 2, 1944; and Memorandum, Tom C. Clark to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, February 23, 1944. All are in file 100-63963, Federal Bureau of Investigation. Also see Tom C. Clark to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, May 24, 1944, file 100-31159, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

[43]See Federal Bureau of Investigation Report, November 10, 1944; John Edgar Hoover to Tom C. Clark, November 29, 1944; and Tom C. Clark to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, December 9, 1944. All are in file 100-63963, Federal Bureau of Investigation. Also see Hartzel v. United States, 322 U.S. 680 (1944). It is unknown why Clark took six months to conclude that the Hartzel decision made further investigations of the Afro-American chain unnecessary.

[44]See John Edgar Hoover to Tom C. Clark, February 22, 1945, file 100-31159-204; and Tom C. Clark to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, March 1, 1945, file 146-7-64-354. Both are at the Justice Department, Washington, D.C.

[45]See XXX [pseud.], "Washington Gestapo," The Nation, July 24, 1943, pp. 94-95; David Wise, The American Police State: The Government Against the People (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 298; Bill Brown and William C. Sullivan, The Bureau: My Thirty Years in Hoover's FBI (New York: W.W.

Norton, 1979), pp. 268-69; Sanford J. Ungar, FBI (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), pp. 255-56, 328; and David J. Garrow, The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), p. 153.

[46]Ralph Matthews, "The Big Parade," Baltimore Afro-American, October 11, 1941.

[47]Interviews, Billy Rowe, January 3, 1983, and Frank Bolden, January 14, 1983.

[48]Durr, The Negro Press, pp. 2-3.